

The Fourth Church Pulpit

A LONGING IN THE SOUL

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It is in the quest that the finding comes. For a spiritual quest means precisely that: not starting in a vacuum at square one, but starting where we are with what we have found, to quest for it again. In Augustine's beautiful term, it is *fides quaerens intellectum* — faith in search of understanding — so that, having found understanding, faith can search yet again ... For it is in the quest that we find; it is in the finding that we seek.

Jaroslav Pelikan
Writing as a Means of Grace

FOURTH
PRESBY
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
Psalm 42
John 1: 1-14

“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.”
Psalm 42:1

Last Wednesday morning I was at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum and Memorial in Jerusalem. Fifty-three of us from Fourth Church were visiting Israel and what began as a tourist adventure had become for each of us, at some level in our souls, a spiritual pilgrimage — Nazareth, Galilee, Capernaum, Sermon on the Mount, Jordan River, Jericho, and now we were in Jerusalem.

The first thing visitors see at Yad Vashem is the Street of Righteous Gentiles, a long boulevard of trees, each planted to honor a Gentile who risked his/her life to rescue Jews during the Holocaust. Next is the Children's Memorial. Over the entrance there are large stone candles of varying lengths, each snuffed out prematurely. We walked through a tunnel representing the entrance to the gas chambers through which one and one-half million children passed to their executions. Our gregarious, always joking, laughing group of American Presbyterians became quiet. Each of us found someone to hold onto. Inside, in a large dark room, candles flickered, reflected over and over in mirrors; soft recorded voices quietly recited names, ages, and towns of the little ones. “Janina Kuzma, age fourteen, Warsaw, Madia Novak, age three ...”

And then the museum itself, a detailed chronicle of the Jewish experience in Europe in the 1930s leading up to the Nazi regime's Final Solution: thousands of posters, newspapers, concentration camp manifests, meticulous lists, detailed and careful orders for equipment, for the most effective poison gas tablets, architectural renderings and cost estimates for the most effective crematoria: and pictures, pictures of laughing German soldiers humiliating Jewish people, then destroying homes, businesses, synagogues, herding entire villages to carefully prepared burial pits, then shooting entire families, ultimately, the Final Solution: the extermination camps. It is an experience in evil: a detailed accounting of human depravity — exceeded in evil and obscenity in all of history only by those who somehow today deny that it happened, or that it is exaggerated, or over-emphasized.

To visit Yad Vashem is to experience an emotional, spiritual and almost physical assault on your own humanity. Until the end. At the end of the museum is an art gallery. In the gallery, on permanent exhibit is art created by the Jewish people in the concentrations camps. Some of it is heavy, dark, grim, but not all of it. Some is bright, colorful, lively, full of life and hope.

At the conclusion of arguably the most convincing documentation of human evil, there is an alternative view, the suggestion of a depth to the human spirit that will not, and cannot, be destroyed. Even in death camps people drew pictures, sculpted, wrote poetry, expressed their creativity, created beauty. One very famous picture shows four Jewish musicians, on folding chairs, in front of their concentration camp barrack, a string quartet, making music, thinking, I imagine, of a line from their Psalter,

“Because your steadfast love is better than life itself, my lips will praise you ... as long as I live.” Psalm 63:3

Even on the walls of the camp, where many of the children were executed, liberating allied forces found children's drawings of flowers and butterflies.

There is something in us, apparently, some truth about us, some reality about our humanity, that will not and cannot be destroyed. It is our soul. Political tyrants have always understood that. Totalitarian dictators inevitably watch with suspicion religion and art and sooner or later get around to shutting down the churches and censoring the artists. The Chinese government recently prevented a distinguished film director from attending The New York Film

Festival to receive an award. *The New Yorker* commented: "The Chinese Government profoundly distrusts its own people, especially its artists."

We already know that Marxist dictatorships cannot abide freedom of religion — and the freedom of the spirit it nurtures. Why? Because both religion and art affirm that there is something about us that the state cannot control; that there is a reality to the human spirit that is free, that longs for God, that searches for meaning and hope and fullness of life.

Religion and art have a long and distinguished relationship. The prophets in Israel were elegant poets. In Greek culture the questions of life and death and meaning are dealt with not by the classic gods of mythology so much as in Greek drama. In Hebrew religion, when King David runs out of words he dances before the Lord. Early monastic Christians chanted as a new form of prayer and meditation in a way that is so deeply meaningful that a group of Spanish Benedictine monks are on the top of the charts — for a second time — with a compact disc of Gregorian chants. And the princes of the Roman Church competed with one another to commission paintings and sculpture and turned their capital city into a museum of human creativity.

But then in the West, following the Protestant Reformation, art and religion part company. Reformed Christianity was an effort to express the truth of the faith in a way that could be understood intellectually. In the interests of establishing the rational credibility of the faith the reformers reworked the liturgy, put it in a common language, taught that faithful Christians should be able to read and think about what they believed: that faith involves mind as well as heart and soul, all of which was good and healthy. But the zealots took it from there — broke out the stained glass windows to let in the light, ripped out the ornate statues and painted over the frescoes. Rumor has it that Huldreich Zwingli personally supervised the white-washing of the Cathedral walls in Zurich.

What happened, of course, was that western religion forgot about the fact that we have soul, that there is longing for meaning, transcendence, for God, in each of us.

Ironically, what the West got was not simply a clear and reasonable religion cleansed of all art. It got bad art — in our day Sallman's Anglo-Saxon Jesus and something called "Praise Music." C.S. Lewis once quipped that modern Christianity is characterized by "ugly music, ugly architecture, and bad poetry."

Journalist Bill Granger, who lives in our neighborhood, is a friend of Fourth Presbyterian Church and writes about us occasionally, as he did in the Arlington Heights paper last week. Granger is a Roman Catholic, but one of the reasons he likes Fourth Church is that his church has stopped using Latin in the interests of rendering the faith understandable. Granger thinks something of the mystery and beauty — and truth — of faith may have gotten lost in the process. So he drops in on us now and then because he knows the Presbyterian choir still sings in Latin on a regular basis.

People who have given up on institutional religion still find themselves profoundly moved by great music. People who long ago stopped participating in public worship will be moved to tears by Faure's *Requiem* or Samuel Barber's *Adagio For Strings*.

Why? Because art expresses truth that is not accessible to the intellect alone. If you want to know what a water lily is you can look it up in a biology textbook, but you will not know the whole truth about water lilies until you go to the Art Institute and experience the truth that Claude Monet saw and painted.

"As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God," the psalmist wrote.

There is a spiritual hunger abroad in the land. At precisely the moment in history when we seem most secular, there is a rebirth of the spiritual, of seeking and searching. When the Pope visits, the nation stops in its tracks and watches — even though the vast majority do not agree with most of what he has to say.

Harvey Cox wrote about the overwhelming affection and enthusiasm young people expressed during his last visit observing that the Pope is

“a living symbol of something they long for; an alternative to the vacancy and monotony of the sped-up consumer culture. The young people loved the pageantry, but not the catechism.” [*Fire From Heaven*, p. 307]

In a current book on Pentecostalism, Cox argues that the Pentecostal churches are experiencing enormous growth throughout the world at the very moment the mainline Protestant churches are stagnant at best, declining at worst, because they have remembered something we have forgotten. He writes,

“Pentecostalism has spoken to the spiritual emptiness of our time by reaching beyond creed and ceremony into the core of human religiousness, into what might be called primal spirituality, that largely unprocessed nucleus of the psyche in which the unending struggle for a sense of purpose and significance goes on.” [p.81]

That sounds like soul — a longing in the soul, to me.

Cox thinks that the reappearance of this “primal spirituality” tells us a lot about ourselves and our time — that our spirituality transcends all the social and psychological explanations we are fond of using to explain ourselves and our world. We are an age, he says, that has found “exclusively secular explanations of life wanting” and we are reminded that “within us all we carry a homo-religiousness” — a spiritual being — a soul.

In her *New York Times* editorial about the “Trial and Verdict: O.J. as Metaphor,” Maureen Dowd quoted Robert Coles, Harvard psychiatrist, who said the trial was “the anatomy of all the tensions, polarizations, suspicions, distrusts, grudges, and reasons for the grudges — writ large.”

Commenting on Katie Couric’s interview with a psychologist, Dr. Coles said, “Instead of dealing with right and wrong, we talk about psychology. Give me St. Augustine anytime.” [*The New York Times*, 10/5/95]

I agree. Psychology and sociology alone don’t help me deal with what happened in California last week. The trial exposes, I submit, a spiritual sickness, an infection in the soul of the nation; a racism so deep that questions of truth and justice are shoved aside — by police, in tolerating it and overlooking it, and by the public after the trial.

I need more than sociology and psychology to understand white racism which accommodates, accepts, persistent racist behavior on the part of police, but also black racism which can make a hero out of a man who, quite apart from his guilt or innocence of the crime of which he was accused, for ten years violently abused his wife, and is quickly recovering status as cultural icon. What the nation needs, I believe, is not more psychology and sociology, but corporate confession.

In a very influential recent book, Wade Clark Roof calls the baby boomers, and all of us, a *Generation of Seekers, a generation searching for meaning, for hope, for values, for something big and important enough to commit ourselves to.*

The psalmist wrote:

“As a deer longs for the flowing stream,
so my soul longs for you, O God.”

I love that image. I always have. I suppose it has to do with the fact that one of the promises made to me when I was a child and not very interested in visiting my aunt and uncle on their farm — because it was a long and boring car ride — was that we might see some deer on the way. For years we never did; in fact, I doubted that deer even existed, although the promise was always made. And then one evening, on the way home, there they were, a hundred feet away, five or six of them, standing against a backdrop of trees on the side of a Pennsylvania mountain. I can see them still. Later, working in the summer during college, I was dispatched to cut the weeds around a small,

secondary reservoir. Walking through the woods I came upon a deer, a small buck, alone, standing in the path. It startled me. I knew I was in no danger but the hair on the back of my neck stood up. We observed each other for a few moments and then he turned and in great dignity walked into the woods. Deer don't act like that ordinarily. For some reason, he allowed me to get close and I think about him every time I read the words of the 42nd Psalm.

It was, I have concluded, a moment of transcendence. A moment I was given to experience something of the mystery of the world and life and God and my own soul.

It was a moment repeated — for me — when the depth of existence, my existence, my life in this beautiful world, my life in relationship with people I love, causes I care about, is suddenly made manifest; when God grabs me by the scruff of the neck and says “slow down, open your eyes and ears and heart; pay attention to the mystery and glory of your own life, your own soul.” That happens for me when I visit the snow leopard at the Lincoln Park Zoo; or hear the Chicago Symphony Orchestra play Beethoven; or stand quietly and experience Monet's water lilies; or sit here immersed in the beauty of the choir's anthem.

A moment repeated as I walked from the Holocaust Museum to the Art Gallery at Yad Vashem ... and repeated, I confess, whenever on a Sunday morning in this place, I ponder the freedom of the artist-creator, the passion of God's self-expression in the man Jesus, the word of God, the word made flesh — the word of God's eternal, indestructible grace, for me ...

There is within you a “primal spirituality,” a soul that seeks for God.

I think the most important dimension of your being is not your prestige, your status, your money or your accomplishments; it is the longing in your soul.

So, acknowledge it, praise God for it. Sing it and pray it — for there is one to hear it, and receive it and answer it; an artist, who in Jesus Christ, has expressed the love and hope and meaning for which you and I seek and long — as a deer longs for flowing streams. Amen.